



How We Experience Life: Perception

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When someone says, “That makes me crazy!”, what do they mean? What are they perceiving that is making them suffer? Is it really making them suffer?

Perception is one of the five ways in which we experience life. The Buddha called these ways, the Five Aggregates, aggregates meaning that each way is a collection. For example, the perception aggregate is a collection of many different perceptions that arise over time. The five ways are also called the Five Aggregates of Clinging because, as we will see, it is our attachment to them that causes suffering.

What is perception?

Perception is defined by the dictionary as the state of being or process of becoming aware of something through the senses, and/or a way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something; **a mental impression**. In how we experience life as noted below, we define perception a mental impression of something that we are made aware of through the senses.

How does perception fit in as to how we experience life?

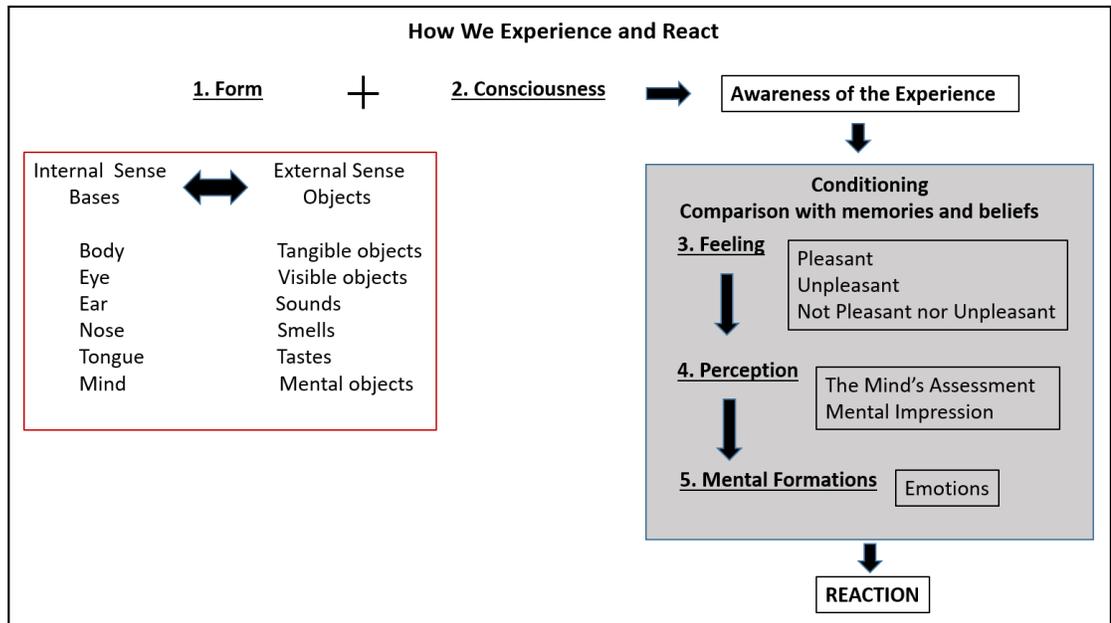
Perception is part of the flow of how we experience life. To summarize from the Practice of Mindfulness: A Guide:

We have **six sense organs** (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind). These organs contact **sense objects** (tangible objects, visible objects, sounds, smells, tastes, and mental objects: thoughts/memories). This interaction is called **form**. All of our experiences come via one or more of these sense organs. However, although our sense organs are constantly sensing, we are not aware of this interaction until our **consciousness** makes contact with the sense organ and the object sensed. When all three factors are connected, we become **aware** of what we can call an experience.

The mind conditions that awareness by comparing it with stored memories and beliefs. Out of this comparison arise a series of three conditioning factors: **feelings, perceptions** and **mental formations**.

Feelings are what is sensed in the body about the experience. These feeling are not emotions. Emotions are mental formations. Feelings occur instantly after awareness and are either pleasant, neutral or unpleasant. After a feeling arises, a **perception** (mental impression, identification, recognition, discrimination, assessment) of the experience arises in the mind. Note that the perception is dependent on memory for identification. If we have no previous memory of what we have originally sensed, we can't identify it. Next, **mental formations** (emotions) arise as a result of the feeling and the perception. Depending on the intensity of the mental formation, a reaction might occur.

The diagram below summarizes this process:



Recent scientific research confirms this flow. Lisa Barrett Feldman, a scientist at Tufts University and Harvard University explains that in order for the mind to make sense out of an experience, it has to draw upon memories and beliefs to compare. *“To understand why this is the case, let’s take your brain’s perspective for a moment. Like those ancient, mummified Egyptian pharaohs, the brain spends eternity entombed in a dark, silent box. It cannot get out and enjoy the world’s marvels directly; it learns what is going on in the world only indirectly via scraps of information from the light, vibrations, and chemicals that become sights, sounds, smells, and so on. Your brain must figure out the meaning of those flashes and vibrations, and its main clues are your past experiences, which it constructs as simulations within its vast network of neural connections. Your brain has learned that a single sensory cue, such as a loud bang, can have many different causes— a door being slammed, a bursting balloon, a hand clap, a gunshot. It distinguishes which of these different causes is most relevant only by their probability in different contexts. It asks, Which combination of my past experiences provides the closest match to this sound, given this particular situation with its accompanying sights, smells, and other sensations? And so, trapped within the skull, with only past experiences as a guide, your brain makes predictions.”* Barrett, Lisa Feldman. *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*.

This prediction is what we call perception, the mental impression that the mind has created to recognize what we have experienced through the senses. However, depending on the information that the mind has drawn from memory, the perception is more detailed than just a mere identification. Take for example, the perception of the loud bang that Dr. Barrett mentioned. If we have a memory of a balloon bursting that we found annoying, the mind might create the perception of what just happened as an annoying balloon bursting. From this perception, an unpleasant mental formation arises of annoyance. Thus, from merely experiencing a loud noise and an image of a balloon, we become annoyed. If on the other hand, we had the same experience with no stored memory of an annoyance of a balloon bursting, we might be intrigued at the balloon bursting and not annoyed.

Another example: a person attends their 50th high school reunion. At that gathering, she sees three women together and experiences an unpleasant feeling. The mind has found a memory of these women being the elite clique that excluded her 50 years ago. This perception that arises is one of unpleasant people who did her harm. This perception causes the emotion of anger to arise and she reacts by avoiding engaging in conversation with them.

How do we deal with our perceptions?

When we suffer, it is because the perception or mental impression created from our memories and held beliefs cause unpleasant mental formations to arise that can then lead to a reaction. As in the example above, the reaction is withdrawal. At the time a reaction occurs, we may be only aware of the mental formation and not the perception. To work with our perception, we need to be aware of it with mindfulness to investigate.

The actor, Tom Selleck, starred in a series of movies as Jesse Stone, a policeman in a small Massachusetts town. When he had trouble solving a crime, he would recall the saying, "When you don't like the answers you are getting, check your premises." Regarding suffering, the saying would be, "When you don't like the mental formations you are getting, check your perceptions."

Practicing mindfulness, you can investigate with energy. Ask three questions:

- What is your perception?
- Is it true now?
- Can you let go of it and be open to possibility?

In the example above, the person might investigate her perception and realize that it was based on past memory. It may not be true now. These people may have changed in 50 years! It might turn out that the encounter could have been pleasant. By letting go of the perception, you remain open to possibility.

*What we know of other people
Is only our memory of the moments
During which we knew them. And they have
Changed since then
We must
Also remember
That at every meeting we are meeting a
Stranger. (T.S. Eliot)*

If you choose not to investigate and change your perception, it is likely that you will continue to suffer. Attachment to your perception is the cause of your suffering.

De Mello states: "And what is an attachment? A need, a clinging that blunts your sensitivity, a drug that clouds your **perception**. That is why as long as you have the slightest attachment for anything or any person, love cannot be born. For love is sensitivity, and sensitivity that is impaired even in the slightest

degree is sensitivity destroyed. Just as the malfunctioning of one essential piece of a radar set distorts reception, and distorts your response to what you perceive.”

*“Try it out now, identify the negative feeling that this event aroused in you. Was it anxiety or insecurity, jealousy or anger or guilt? What does that emotion say to you about yourself, your values, your way of perceiving the world and life and above all your programming and conditioning? If you succeed in discovering this, you will drop some illusion you have clung to till now, or you will change a distorted **perception** or correct a false belief or learn to distance yourself from your suffering, as you realize that it was caused by your programming and not by reality; and you will suddenly find that you are full of gratitude for those negative feelings and to that person or event that caused them.”*

Taking care of yourself and your perceptions.

Your body has an influence on your perceptions. Lisa Feldman Barrett in *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* cites a study where scientists in Israel found that judges were significantly more likely to deny parole to a prisoner if the hearing was just before lunchtime. The judges experienced their perceptions of denial not as hunger but as evidence for their parole decision. Immediately after lunch, the judges began granting paroles with their customary frequency.

Dr. Feldman recommends maintaining your health by:

- Eating healthy
- Exercising
- Getting enough sleep
- Improving your physical surroundings (less noise and crowding, more light and greenery)

The Ten General Deluded Perceptions

As we investigate our perceptions through mindfulness, investigation and energy, we can check to see if our perceptions are affected by one of the ten general deluded perceptions as taught by the Buddha. The delusion is caused by our ignorance of how life really is. Bhante Gunaratana (Bhante G.) has written a wonderful book called *Meditation on Perception: Ten Healing Practices to Cultivate Mindfulness* (Wisdom Publications 2014) that addresses each of these deluded perceptions. He references the Buddha’s most famous teaching on changing our perception, the [Girimananda Sutta](#) (AN 10.60). In this sutta, the Buddha teaches ten perceptions and practices that lead to purified perception.

Bhikkhu Bodhi in the forward to *Meditation on Perception* notes that in order to cease our suffering, we must not only resist craving (attachment) but also transform our cognition (way of thinking). This cognitive breakthrough involves changing our perception so that we see things as they really are rather than bask in our ignorant goals of enjoyment, etc. We change distorted perception to a purified perception.

The Girimananda sutta concerns the Venerable Girimananda, a monk in the Buddha’s time who became “sick, afflicted, and gravely ill.” The Buddha’s manservant, Ananda, informed the Buddha about this and asked if the Buddha would “visit him out of compassion.” Instead of visiting, the Buddha asked if Ananda would speak to him about ten perceptions. The Buddha then gave Ananda the discourse on the

ten perceptions and afterwards said, *“If Ananda, you visit the bhikkhu Girimananda and speak to him about these ten perceptions, it is possible that on hearing about them he will immediately recover from his affliction.”*

“Then, when the Venerable Ananda had learned these ten perceptions from the Blessed One, he went to the Venerable Girimananda and spoke to him about them. When the Venerable Girimananda heard about these ten perceptions, his affliction immediately subsided. The Venerable Girimananda recovered from that affliction, and that is how he was cured of his affliction.”

While we don't know Girimananda's affliction, Bhikkhu Bodhi notes *“What is of prime importance is their ability to heal the most debilitating illness of all, the ignorance inherent in mental distortions and in toxic views about ourselves and the world in which we live.”* (xi)

Each one of these perceptions is explained more fully in the book as well on the White Hall Meditation website (<https://www.whitehallmeditation.org/meditation-on-perception/>)

The ten deluded perceptions are:

1. [There is permanence](#)
2. [There is a “self”](#)
3. [The body is pure \(attractive\)](#)
4. [Afflictions of the body are remote possibilities](#)
5. [Thoughts of pleasure and ill-will are harmless and the way life is](#)
6. [Craving is the way to pleasure](#)
7. [Suffering is inevitable](#)
8. [The world is delightful](#)
9. [We are our thoughts and we cling to them](#)
10. [We cannot experience our mind](#)

Below is a diagram showing the 10 deluded perceptions and the purified perception for each:

	Deluded Perception	Purified Perception
1	There is permanence.	Everything is impermanent .
2	There is a “self.”	Everything is of selfless nature.
3	The body is pure (attractive).	The body is impure (unattractive).
4	Afflictions of the body are remote possibilities.	Danger: The body is always susceptible to afflictions (e.g. injury, disease).
5	Thoughts of pleasure and ill-will are harmless and the way life is.	These thoughts are unwholesome and must be abandoned to become at peace.
6	Craving is the way to pleasure.	Craving leads to clinging which causes suffering. Dispassion releases us from suffering.
7	Suffering is inevitable.	Suffering can cease by developing concentration through jhana practice meditation.
8	The world is delightful.	Nondelight: Everything in the world is impermanent, unsatisfactory and of selfless nature.
9	We are our thoughts and we cling to them.	All mental formations are impermanent and selfless. We must give them up.
10	We cannot experience our mind.	Mindfulness of breathing purifies our perceptions and shows the true relationship with our mind.

How to work with the Ten General Deluded Perceptions

When working with perceptions that cause suffering, we have three choices:

1. Keep the perception.
2. Transform (purify) the perception.
3. Let the perception go.

If we keep the perception, it is likely that we will continue to suffer. If we want to purify the perception, we use the first three factors of awakening: mindfulness, investigation, and energy. We choose one of the ten general deluded perceptions and investigate it by asking:

- Is it true?
- Can it be replaced by the corresponding purified perception?

For example, with the deluded perception of there is permanence, we ask ourselves is there anything that is permanent?

“We also acknowledge impermanence, but our acknowledgement is superficial. Deep in our subconscious, a sense of permanence is lurking. Perhaps this hidden sense is why we keep patching up our broken teeth, dry skin, brittle nails, gray hair, hunched backs, weak eyes, impaired hearing, breaking bones, and many other problems caused in this fragile body by impermanence. Similarly, our moods, feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and memories go through many changes each moment. We take

medicines, see mental health specialists, and engage in many other activities, including meditation, to correct our minds. But while we are doing all this, impermanence is still going on, systematically altering and ultimately destroying everything inside our body and mind. Our organs, our cells, the nervous system, the quality of our blood, the strength of our lungs, and the very structure of our bones are all going through very rapid and unmistakable changes. No matter how much we patch up the surface, beneath the skin, impermanence is very consistently working its course. Nothing on earth— no science, no technology, no magic— can stop this change.

When we realize that this is the case, the question becomes, what should we do with this knowledge? How can we make our understanding useful? The Buddha's answer is that impermanence is the key that opens the mind to understanding suffering and nonself. He pointed out clearly the connection between impermanence and suffering. He taught that it is not impermanence itself that causes suffering but rather clinging to impermanent things. When we do not cling to impermanent things, our suffering ends. As the Buddha said in the Mahasunnata Sutta: "I do not see even a single kind of form, Ananda, from the change and alteration of which there would not arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who lusts for it and takes delight in it."

This passage states clearly that suffering arises not because an object is impermanent but because we are attached to it. When we attain enlightenment, we do not suffer. But no impermanent thing has become permanent. Impermanent things continue to be impermanent whether we attain enlightenment or not. Nothing stops a thing's impermanent nature, which would exist whether or not the Buddhas had come into existence. Enlightenment ends suffering because enlightened beings do not lust for or take delight in things that are in every moment changing or passing away. Our suffering will also end when we give up our attachment to impermanent things." Gunaratana, Henepola. Meditation on Perception: Ten Healing Practices to Cultivate Mindfulness (pp. 49-50)

After investigation, we can know and experience that everything is impermanent, thus transforming our deluded perception.

The State Beyond Perception

The third choice is to realize that there is a state beyond perception and let the perception go.

"When one sees with wisdom that all conditioned things are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and that all the dhammas are without self, then one would be disappointed with suffering, which is the nature of all conditions, conditionings, and conditioned things. This is the path to deliverance." The Dhammapada

We can discover that there is a state beyond perception: *"Here, Ananda, a bhikkhu is percipient thus: "This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is, the stilling of all activities, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana," (AN 10.6 tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi) This state is achieved by meditative concentration and does not last long in our mundane life. However, "it foreshadows the final cessation of perception that accompanies the death of a fully enlightened person – nibbana, the cessation of existence, extinction, the state utterly and permanently beyond death and rebirth, the ultimate goal of the Buddha's path." (p. 127)*

The Buddha concludes: *"Seeing thus, bhikkhus, the instructed noble disciple experiences revulsion toward form, revulsion toward feeling, revulsion toward perception, revulsion toward volitional*

formations, revulsion toward consciousness. Experiencing revulsion, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion [his mind] is liberated. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: 'It's liberated.' He understands: 'Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.'" (tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi) MN 109